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Washington: Eyeball to Eyeball

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Like most good reporters, Harrison Salisbury found nothing new, but gave what he saw a certain coherence, a freshness and an audience that it never had before. It was hardly possible to believe that the bombing of North Vietnam could continue for nearly two years without extensive damage to civilian targets and a large number of casualties. There was no reason to doubt first-hand reports by foreign journalists; Salisbury's own *New York Times* carried James Cameron's stunning reportage last year. But somehow Salisbury's flat, dispassionate *Times*-talk made it seem very real.

This correspondent is no ballistics specialist, he wrote in one of his articles, 'but inspection of several damaged sites and talks with witnesses make it clear that Hanoi residents certainly believe they were bombed by United States planes, that they certainly observed United States planes overhead and that damage certainly occurred right in the centre of town.' That is hardly the prose of a Zola but such has become the basis for a substantial attack on the administration's war policy. The issue seems to transcend the narrower controversy of where the bombs fell. It is more than the 'credibility gap'. There is a moral crisis unique in American history in this century, and every new revelation of deception heightens it.

What the immediate consequences of the Salisbury articles will be is another matter. They have been effectively neutralised, for the moment, by a PR barrage from the Pentagon, which was duly broadcast in *Time* and the *Washington Post*. The *Post* found or was given a copy of a North Vietnamese pamphlet denouncing US air raids, and detailing casualty and damage statistics. In a broadly catty front-page story last Sunday the *Post* juxtaposed Salisbury and the pamphlet, and there was indeed considerable similarity. Clifton Daniel, Managing Editor of the *Times*, supported Salisbury: 'It was apparent in [the] first dispatch - and so stated in a subsequent dispatch - that the casualty figures came from North Vietnamese officials. Where else would he get such figures in Hanoi?' That sounded reasonable enough, but Administration partisans still discredit Salisbury as a Red propagandist.

It has been apparent for some time that 'public opinion' in the US is not going to swing to the side of open criticism. The effect is more subtle. One political writer compares the atmosphere with Japan in the mid-Thirties when the imperial armies were bogged down in mainland China, and the 'dove' politicians in Tokyo wanted a negotiated settlement. But the militarists appealed to the patriotism and sense of 'national purpose' of the Japanese people, and were able to bring the country to total war.

There is no direct analogy here, but the problem of 'national purpose' is similar and there is the same disquieting pressure building in the Pentagon. President Johnson relies heavily on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and somewhat less so on Mr McNamara. He does listen carefully to Walt Whitman Rostow (who has earned the sobriquet, 'the Mad Bomber', for his favourite war strategy), and the advice there is to press on with the destruction of North Vietnam.

The political conflict in Washington at this point seems to be resolved into two camps: those who want to sit tight in South Vietnam, and those who want to push onward and upward with the war in South-East Asia. The former say that 500,000 US soldiers, more or less, can maintain an acceptable stability in South Vietnam, with the help of loyal South Vietnamese soldiers who will 'pacify' the 11,000 villages throughout the countryside. The latter think that nothing can be secured in South Vietnam until the North is brought to surrender, perhaps by vastly extended bombing, but more probably by an invasion.

The President seems to be willing to listen to the 'sit tight' crowd for the time being, at least until that policy is proved wrong. The test may come fairly soon. The strategy in the Mekong delta has now shifted to a joint operation of US and South Vietnamese forces: the locals 'pacify' and the Americans 'search and destroy'. How long that situation can last is problematic. The South Vietnamese are unpredictable, unenthusiastic, and unable to do what is practically an impossible job. The cost to the US in casualties is high in performing the offensive half of the operation.

The theory that an equilibrium of forces and counter-forces can be easily reached in the South is attractive. Vice-president Humphrey stated it optimistically the other day: 'I think they've [the communists] lost the war militarily. Our task now is to maintain security and to help the peoples of Vietnam develop their communities, their local governments, their national government and build a nation.' Free translation: the permanent occupation. But somehow the balance keeps slipping. Pacification does not work the way it is supposed to. The North Vietnamese are not significantly distracted by the bombings. The Saigon government is not turning itself into a model democracy. World opinion is hardening against the US. And finally, the American people's will to press on with the war - or at least with the present version - is not eternally dependable.

So we are now in the eighth year of the US military 'commitment' in Vietnam, with less hope than ever of ending it, to Vietnam's benefit or ours. Representative L. Mendel Rivers wants to 'flatten Hanoi', and

Johnson and senators would be eager to escalate to China. Rostow tells the President that Vietnam is his 'Cuban missile crisis' writ large, that it is eyeball to eyeball, and even if it takes years, Mr Johnson cannot blink.

It is depressing to have to wish the 'equilibrium' partisans well, but there is no one else to wish well these days. The stalemate is causing all kinds of frustrations; there was a story all over Washington a week ago that Rostow and Richard Helms (director of the Central Intelligence Agency) actually came to blows at a dinner party at the end of a long argument about the effectiveness of the bombing raids. Helms, presumably said they did no good. Essentially he is right, which means that the CIA is on the side of peace and freedom. And that is as good a way as any to introduce the topsy-turviness of US foreign policy in this new year.